

## A MODERN SURVEY OF THE ATONEMENT

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### I.

STRICTLY speaking, the word atonement is not a New Testament word, the only passage in which it occurs in the Authorised Version having been deliberately altered by the Revisers to 'reconciliation' (*Rom. v, 11*). Call it, however, by whatever name we will, the fact of the At-one-ment between God and man, and man and God, through Jesus Christ has always stood as the foundation-stone of our Faith. Christianity is first and foremost a religion of Atonement.

Modern preachers often speak of our Lord as a great teacher, a reformer, a philanthropist; but all these aspects of His Person and ministry, true and valuable as they are, are very little stressed in the Apostles' teaching, and pale into insignificance before the central fact that He came as the world's Redeemer, 'the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.'

It would be superfluous in the present case to give instances from the four Gospels and the Epistles, as well as from the very structure of the Gospels themselves, of the importance of our Lord's death and passion in His own mind and in those of His apostles. It is enough to say that the Cross and all that it implies was then, and has been ever since, the centre round which Christian doctrine has been built. It has often been said that the strength of the Roman Catholic Church is the focussing of her worship on the ceremony which above all 'proclaims the Lord's death till He come'; and it is equally true to say that the success of the Salvation Army does not rest on its philanthropic activities; it has flourished because the message that 'Christ died for our sins' is shouted at street corners, blared forth on the cornet, and banged out on a big drum. No form of Christianity can ignore the Atonement and survive for any considerable time.

### II.

When, however, Christian teachers have attempted to interpret and explain the fact of the Atonement, various and even contradictory theories have been put forward; and it is the purpose of this paper to try to review and comment upon some of those theories.

(i) It was not until the latter part of the second century (by which time the canon of the New Testament had become practically fixed, so that at least the majority of its books were available for purposes of study and evidence to the whole Church) that the first attempt to formulate a theory of the Atonement was made. It was Irenaeus who seized upon the word 'ransom' in the sentence 'the Son of Man is come to give His life a ransom for many' and found in it the key-word to the whole problem. A ransom, argued Irenaeus and those who elaborated his theory, must be paid *to* someone *by* someone else. If the death of Christ was a ransom, who paid it? The answer was, God. To whom was it paid? The answer was, to the devil. By paying the devil the life of Jesus, God secures man's release from the captivity of Satan.

This line of reasoning was so clear and sounded so simple that it held the field in Christian theology for nearly a thousand years. It was made (to our minds) grotesque by further elaborations such as that of Rufinus (evidently a forerunner of Isaac Walton!), who metaphorically pictures God as angling to catch the devil with the body of our Saviour as the bait. Similarly, Gregory of Nyssa describes Satan as being caught on the hook of Christ's Divinity, which had been concealed in His Humanity; and to Peter Lombard the Cross was a trap baited with Christ's blood!

(ii) It was not until the twelfth century that an alternative to this 'ransom' theory of the Atonement was put forward by Anselm, who wrote his famous treatise to answer the question which constitutes its title, *Cur Deus Homo?*—Why did God become man? Anselm's key-word was the word 'debt': man owes obedience to God; by sin he has failed to pay what is due, and so has become God's debtor. The debt could only be discharged by the Son of God, who 'for us men and for our salvation' became man and suffered death on the cross. In this way God's honour is satisfied and man redeemed.

Anselm's theory, it will be seen, differs essentially from that which had gone before in that the price is paid this time, not to the devil, but to God.

(iii) In this respect Anselm was followed by the leading theologians of the Reformation. But as the age of chivalry which may have suggested Anselm's metaphor of a debt of honour had passed—(we might also have mentioned the possibility of Irenaeus' emphasis on 'ransom' having been suggested by acquaintance with the banditti of Asia Minor)—so the Reformers thought of God rather in terms of Tudor despotism, or its equivalent in the sixteenth century tyrants of mid-European states. Thus the word 'propitiation' became the key-word of this theory and the starting-point of their interpretation.

According to Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, and other Reformers, God is a great Ruler, and men having broken His laws must be punished; if the transgressor is not punished, then God's anger must be propitiated by someone else suffering in his place. The Son of God therefore comes down to earth to suffer in His Person the punishment which should rightly fall on us. It is as if a king, about to storm a rebellious city, is persuaded to stay his hand by a close relative or friend of his in the city offering his life in exchange for those of all the other citizens, like the six citizens of Calais. Expressions such as 'appeasing the wrath of God' are typical of this school, which has been followed in this country and U.S.A. more by Free Churchmen than by Anglican theologians and preachers.

(iv) The seventeenth century saw a partial revolt from the above theory, with the result that the defence of the Atonement was taken up anew by a Dutch lawyer, Hugo Grotius, who like Anselm before him attempted to restate the case in his treatise on *The Satisfaction of Christ*.

Grotius, although he uses much of the language of the Reformers, would not admit that our Lord was punished. His sufferings were not penal, but illustrative. God, he said, is the moral governor of the universe, whose laws cannot be broken with impunity. Unless sin were punished the dignity of God's government would be destroyed. Christ, the sinless One, alone could pay the price of sin and thus enable man to be forgiven without prejudice to the Divine justice. This, called usually the 'governmental' theory, takes the word 'justice' for its key-

note and has influenced the Anglican Church more than any other theory of the Atonement.

'There was none other good enough  
To pay the price of sin;  
He only could unlock the gate  
Of Heaven, and let us in'

is our hymnal summary of the governmental theory.

### III.

These then are the four theories which, with more or less slight variations, have had most influence on Christian theology hitherto, and before going any further it may be convenient to summarize them as follows:

(i) The '*Ransom*' theory (end of second century). Key-word, '*ransom*'; distinctive idea, God redeeming man from the devil.

(ii) The '*Commercial*' theory (eleventh century). Key-word, '*debt*'; distinctive idea, the honour of God vindicated by the Saviour paying the debt incurred by human sin.

(iii) The '*Penal-Satisfaction*' theory (sixteenth century). Key-word, '*propitiation*'; distinctive idea, God appeased by Christ's punishment in our place.

(iv) The '*Governmental*' theory (seventeenth century). Key-word, '*justice*'; distinctive feature, the object of Christ's death to satisfy, not God's honour, nor His anger, so much as His moral government.

All these theories have had their value. The fact that each seems to have been coloured to some extent by the ideas and associations of its age only shows that it was an honest attempt to explain the unchanging fact of the Atonement in terms that each age could comprehend. And yet, because we think quite differently now, these theories seem to us to be too mechanical, or too artificial, or too immoral. Each seems to have seized upon a single metaphor or idea and to have built upon that alone, rather than upon all that our Lord and His disciples taught about God's dealings with mankind. As Bishop Westcott said:

'each view is essentially incomplete, and it is perilous to attempt to draw conclusions from limited interpretations of Scripture' (*Ep. to Hebs.*, p. 300).

The one test to apply to all theology is, what does it teach us about God? And it is here that these theories seem to be so

inadequate. To begin with the latest, the 'governmental' theory seems to draw too much on political analogy in its doctrine of God. The moral government of the universe is conceived of as an objective reality to which God Himself stands in the relation of a kind of magistrate. Yet the governmental theory is surely preferable to the rather terrible Calvinistic notion of God being appeased with sacrifices, a conception really pre-Christian and heathenish; or to Anselm's theory, of which it has been said that it suggests too strongly a Shylock demanding his pound of flesh. The 'ransom' theory we are bound to dismiss from serious consideration as grotesque: we can hardly imagine God 'doing a deal' with Satan.

Leaving this theory then out of account, it would seem that the rest, apart from other weaknesses, lose sight of the great fact of our religion, that God reveals Himself fully and perfectly in Jesus Christ. Rather they seem to imply a contrast between God and Christ. This is how an American writer (C. E. Jefferson in *Doctrine and Deed*) describes his own experience of such doctrines and the impression they made on him:

'When I was a boy, I thought that God was a strict and solemn and awful King, who was very angry because men had broken His law. He was just, and His justice had no mercy in it. Christ, His Son, was much better-natured and more compassionate, and He came forth into our world to suffer on the cross that God's justice might relax a little and His heart be opened to forgive our race. When I became a young man, I supposed that this was the teaching of the Christian religion. My heart rebelled against it. I would not accept it. I became an infidel. *A man cannot accept a doctrine of God that does not appeal to the best that is in him.*' (Italics mine.)

He then goes on to describe how he learnt later what he thought was a new doctrine, but which was really a very old doctrine which all this time had lain half-hidden, sometimes more than half-revealed, in the long centuries of Christianity.

But before we unearth this old doctrine of the Atonement let us clear the ground a little further; and to do that we must rake out even more thoroughly the old systems which have 'had their day and ceased to be.'

Words like 'ransom,' 'propitiation' and 'debt' have formed the basis of inadequate theories simply because these metaphors have been taken literally and in isolation and then pressed to their logical conclusions. It has been suggested from time to

time that if these words were regarded merely as figures of speech a great deal of the superstructure which they have supported would disappear. For instance, we might speak at the present time of a mother's sacrifice for her children. The word 'sacrifice' is here used as the equivalent to 'unselfishness'; but if we argue on the analogy of sacerdotal rites and ask 'for what is the sacrifice?' and 'to whom is it offered?' we spoil the value of the metaphor. Yet this is what Irenaeus, Anselm, Calvin and Grotius appear to have done in their theories of the Atonement. They have substituted for God revealed in the fulness of His love their own mechanical transactions.

Where in the parable of the prodigal son do we find that the father has to be propitiated, or compensated, before he can forgive the sinner? Where do we read of a ransom having to be paid—presumably to a hungry wolf!—before the lost sheep can be restored to the fold? And if we are told that *we* should forgive until seventy times seven, cannot our Heavenly Father do as much?

#### IV.

But we must pause again. You will say that this paper has contradicted itself. After opening with the strongest possible emphasis on the value of the Atonement, it may seem that all we have done so far has been to disparage it. Unless we can remove such an impression all we have said will be useless. No criticism is worth much until it is able to rebuild on the old foundations a better edifice than that which it has demolished.

The keystone of the new edifice is '*union with God*,' which is the more closely akin to the generally-accepted meaning of the word 'Atonement' (at-one-ment) than are any of the rest. The holiness and the love of God form the basis of our building. The whole Bible leads us on gradually to this conception, which is consummated by God's final revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ. 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself'; 'So God loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son'; 'God commendeth His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.'

In other words, God, who is Love, invisible, eternal, united Himself with us in Christ who is the Word (*λογος*), the expression of God in human form; and we, uniting ourselves

with Christ, become at one with the Father. By penitence, by prayer, by sacrament, and through all these by lives of unselfish usefulness and genuineness, we become at one with Him.

Union with God is becoming increasingly the core of the Church's message to-day. Bishop Westcott, probably more than any other modern theologian, has emphasized this truth, which combines the objective with what might otherwise be considered, and has sometimes been criticized as, too subjective a view of the Atonement. Another criticism which this view may have to meet is that it lays less emphasis on the death of Christ than does the teaching of the Apostles. To that criticism we would reply that by the death of Christ God becomes the sin-bearer of the world. He bears our sins on His mind and heart, as well as 'in His own body, on the tree.'

It has been truly said that there are three conceptions of God—the savage, the pagan, and the Christian.

(a) According to the savage conception God is a vengeful and capricious tyrant. We have outgrown that.

(b) According to the pagan idea He is indifferent to the wants and woes of man. He stands aloof, feeling no pain and sorrow. Much of the vague semi-unitarian religion that we meet with to-day goes little, if any, further than this.

(c) But according to the Christian idea God suffers: He bears our sorrows and sins because He shares them; 'The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.' And nothing but the Cross could ever have shown us that.

It may be objected that all this boils down to sympathy; it would be truer to say that it leads up to sympathy, for sympathy is love, and love is the greatest thing in all the world:

'Just as I am; thy love unknown  
Hath broken every barrier down:  
Now to be Thine, yea Thine alone,  
O Lamb of God, I come.'

There this paper must end. It has merely reviewed some aspects of the Atonement. Its opinions make no claim to be either original or final. If there is one idea more than another at the back of the writer's mind it is to show that inability to hold any of what might still be called the 'popular' theories of the Atonement may not be incompatible with a firm and, if one may say so, an ever-increasing belief in the central and eternal truths of the Christian Faith.